

## **THE MYSTERY OF THE HAUNTED COTTAGE: extract**

‘Gosh, new people!’ said the dark-haired girl. ‘We haven’t seen new people in simply ages! What are your names?’

There was something about her face that snagged on Martha’s memory. All of their faces, actually. ‘I’m Martha,’ she said, ‘and this is the Doctor.’

‘Hello, Martha,’ they all said together. ‘Hello, Doctor.’

Martha gave them a smile and glanced back. ‘This is kind of weird, isn’t it?’

‘Very,’ the Doctor said. ‘Where are you children off to?’

‘We’re having a picnic!’ the smallest girl said proudly. ‘Mother and Father usually come with us, but this year they said we were old enough to go by ourselves! We’ve never come this far down the path, however. I do so hope we’ll be able to find our way back!’

‘We should be able to,’ the smallest boy said. ‘It’s a straight path.’

‘We’ll let you get back to your picnic, then,’ the Doctor said, and they were immediately assailed by a chorus of spirited goodbyes that actually made Martha take a step backwards. And the next moment the children were walking again, and chatting and laughing among themselves as if they had never been interrupted. The path they were on continued down the hill, swerved gently round an old country cottage and disappeared into the woodland behind. The whole thing looked like a painting on a cheap postcard, and with the kids in the foreground it reminded Martha of ...

‘The Troubleseekers,’ she said.

The Doctor looked at her. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘The books. The Troubleseekers books. Have you never read them?’

‘The Troubleseekers,’ the Doctor said. ‘Thirty-two children’s books, written by Annette Billingsley over the course of fifteen years from 1951. No, never read them.

They were rubbish. Rip-off of the Famous Five and the Secret Seven. Ah, Enid Blyton. I met her once, you know. Odd woman. Unusual ears.'

'Well,' Martha said, speaking quickly before the Doctor could go off on another one of his tangents, 'I read the Troubleseekers. I devoured them. From the Troubleseekers Oath printed on the title page to the list of the other books at the back – I read every little bit. And this – this *here* – is the cover of *The Mystery of the Haunted Cottage*. It's the first one I ever read. This house, this angle, this time of day ... everything. And those kids. I know them all. The tallest one is Humphrey; he's the no-nonsense leader. The girl with the dark hair is Joanne, but she insists on everyone calling her Jo because she's the tomboy. Then there's Simon; he's always trying to prove himself, so he gets into the most trouble. And the youngest is Gertie. She makes scones lathered with jam.'

'Jam-lathered scones. I see.'

'And they're usually shadowed by ... ah, there he is.' She nodded to a nearby tree where a child was hiding, peeking out at them occasionally. 'The little fat boy.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'What?' Martha said defensively, keeping her voice down. 'That's how he was described in the books. Don't blame me. This was 1951. Everything back then was blinkered, sexist and ever-so-slightly racist. It was a backward time.'

'Ah, yes,' said the Doctor, 'because 2007 has none of those things.'

Martha ignored him. 'The little ... *overweight* child wanted to join the Troubleseekers, but he'd always prove too annoying, and every time they'd send him away he'd run off and tattle on them. What was his name, though? It's on the tip of my tongue. It was a nickname, something everyone called him, even his aunt and uncle ...'

The Doctor sighed. 'Was it Fatty, by any chance?'

'That's it,' said Martha, nodding. 'Fatty. Yes, that's him.'

'Children can be so cruel,' the Doctor said. 'Children's writers can be even worse.'

'Doctor,' Martha said, having no other choice but to ask the question, 'are we ... are we in a book?'

'We're not in a book. We can't be in a book.' The Doctor looked around. 'We might be in a book.'